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October 2003

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Denis Fortin

Andrews University, fortind@andrews.edu

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The Cross of Christ: Theological Differences Between Joseph H. Waggoner and Ellen G. White

Denis Fortin

Andrews University Theological Seminary

Since the beginning of Ellen G. White's ministry within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, people have held a variety of opinions regarding her writings and doctrinal authority. The official position of the Church has been that her writings are a source of inspiration for godly living in preparation for Christ's second coming. Although the Scriptures are accepted as the infallible authority and standard of belief and practice, Mrs. White's writings have also constituted a secondary authoritative source of doctrinal truth and provide the church with guidance, instruction, and correction.¹ While most Adventists will readily consider her writings as a source of spiritual guidance and inspiration for daily living, many have dismissed White's doctrinal authority for various reasons. One such reason is that, supposedly, Ellen White was strongly influenced by her friends and early Adventist pioneer church leaders. It is contended that her writings were simply (or often) a reflection of the ideas of other writers in her entourage. Given these assumptions, she is not considered a significant theological thinker.

There are reasons to believe, however, that this was not the case and that she was a free, independent theological thinker in her own right, guided by the Holy Spirit in her prophetic ministry. She was able to articulate and define doctrines within a particular system of thought (i.e. the great controversy theme, and God's love for lost humanity), to sort out doctrinal difficulties and problems, and to write articles and manuscripts on theological issues that were at variance from some of her most trusted friends. To illustrate this, this article will study her theological understanding of the death of Christ in the 1860s and compare it

¹ See Fundamental Belief 17 and its exposition in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe. . .* (Washington: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988), 216-229.

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with the writings of Joseph H. Waggoner on the same doctrine. I believe this comparison will not only shed light on Ellen White's own early perspectives on atonement and the death of Christ, a perspective that had a moderating effect upon early Adventist theology, but will also reveal the theological diversity within early Adventism.

The Atonement According to Joseph H. Waggoner

Of Baptist upbringing, Joseph H. Waggoner (1820-1889) became a Sabatarian Adventist in 1852 after an intense period of personal study. Soon thereafter, he began to preach Adventist doctrines and wrote numerous articles for Adventist periodicals and several doctrinal books during his active life and ministry. His prolific and influential writings gave him a strong theological influence within Adventism, and Jerry Davis concludes that "the views of Waggoner went unchallenged for years and in time, many came to view his arguments as the position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church."²

Of interest to our study is the publication in 1863-1864 of a series of articles on the subject of atonement in the *Review and Herald*. "The Atonement: An Examination of the Remedial System in the Light of Nature and Revelation" appeared in seventeen issues of the denomination's official paper between June 2, 1863, and September 13, 1864. This series was later reprinted in book form under the same title in 1868 and reedited in 1872 (168 pages). A fourth publication of the series appeared in *Signs of the Times* in 1876. In 1884, Waggoner amplified the original series in a volume of 368 pages.³

Waggoner affirmed in his preface that for "all who have faith in the efficacy of the blood of Christ to cleanse from sin, the Atonement is confessed to be the great central doctrine of the gospel."⁴ Yet his basic view on atonement centers around the thought that atonement is more than a sacrifice and involves more than the salvation of mankind; it "is a vindication of justice by an offering to a broken law."⁵ While Waggoner upheld the substitutionary and vicarious nature of Christ's death as the penalty for humanity's transgression of the law of God, he was careful to point out that this was not a "vicarious atonement," for Christ's death as the sacrificial victim is different from the atonement.⁶

² Jerry Morten Davis, "A Study of Major Declarations on the Doctrine of the Atonement in Seventh-day Adventist Literature" (MA Thesis, Andrews University, 1962), 7. My original idea to do this comparative study came after reading Davis' thesis some years ago. LeRoy E. Froom also addressed Waggoner's contributions to early Adventist theology in his *Movement of Destiny* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1972), 167-187.

³ In this edition, the 1884 revisions to the original 1863 presentation are of no theological consequence; the theology is identical. Since this edition is more readily available, all subsequent references to Waggoner's ideas are taken from it.

⁴ Waggoner, *The Atonement: An Examination of a Remedial System in the Light of Nature and Revelation* (Oakland: Pacific Press, 1884), iii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 181.

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Waggoner's biblical and theological understanding of atonement was strongly based on and limited to the Old Testament ceremonial systems of sacrifices, as presented in the book of Leviticus. Adopting a rigid reading of such texts as Leviticus 4:22-26, Waggoner concluded that the biblical view of atonement is one that must include the ministry of a priest within the sanctuary and that it is only at the end of such a ministry that atonement occurs. From his analysis of the Old Testament, Waggoner saw three steps leading to a complete atonement: (1) the sinner laid his hands on the offering and confessed his sins, (2) the sinner killed the offering, and (3) the priest then made the atonement in the sanctuary. Waggoner was careful to argue that a complete distinction must be made between the offering of the sacrifice and the making of atonement to God.⁷

Transposing this view to the meaning of the death of Christ, Waggoner argued that Jesus's death could only be the preparatory sacrifice for the atonement, since he was killed by sinners. Calvary could not be the atonement in itself because in the Old Testament, the atonement was an activity performed only by the priesthood in the sanctuary. He further argued that while on earth, Jesus was a descendant of David, not of Aaron. Therefore, he could certainly fulfill the offices of prophet and king, but not of priest. It is only after his ascension to heaven, according to Hebrews 7, that Jesus took on also the office of priest after the order of Melchizedek. The atonement is what Christ is doing in heaven now with the merits of his own shed blood by the application of the benefits of his sacrifice to the lives of repentant sinners.⁸

Waggoner's logic is impressive, for if Christ's death completed the atonement, what then would be the need for the intercessory ministry of Christ in heaven after his ascension? "If his mediatorial work was completed when he was on earth . . . then he cannot be a mediator now! and all that the Scriptures say of his priesthood on the throne of his Father in Heaven, there making intercession for us, is incomprehensible or erroneous."⁹ But what Waggoner perhaps failed to see in his study of biblical atonement was instances where sacrifices were offered in the Old Testament and atonement done without the priestly ministration of blood in the sanctuary (e.g. Leviticus 6:8-13; 7:1-6). This certainly implies that sacrifices have atoning merits of their own before any ministration in the sanctuary.

The theological reasons behind Waggoner's limiting atonement to the ministry of the priest in the sanctuary should not be overlooked. He and other contemporary Seventh-day Adventist theologians, such as Uriah Smith, feared that confusing Christ's substitutionary death on Calvary with a completed atonement would lead irrevocably to antinomianism, immorality, and universalism. If the

⁷ Ibid., 182-183.

⁸ Ibid., 188-189.

⁹ Ibid., 190-191.

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atonement is complete at the cross, they argued, then Christ died for all men and their sins have been atoned for, so consequently, all will be saved. Such a view leads to a depreciation of the law of God and to immorality. To avoid this dilemma, Smith argued that another mistaken conclusion is resorted to by some theologians, “which is that Christ did not atone for all men on the cross, but only for a chosen few, whom God purposed to save.” But predestination, they argued, also leads to antinomianism and immorality. Waggoner and Smith were thus emphatic that atonement could be accomplished only by a priest in the sanctuary and only after Christ ascended to heaven, and that the merits of Christ’s sacrifice are applied only to repentant sinners.¹⁰

Ellen G. White’s Understanding of Atonement

At about the same time as Waggoner published his series of articles on the atonement, Ellen White (1827-1915) published in 1869 a small pamphlet titled “The Sufferings of Christ” and the same year published it a second time in *Testimonies for the Church*, number 17.¹¹ This pamphlet was republished a few more times: in 1879 as a series of articles in *Signs of the Times*, in 1885-1886 in *Present Truth*, and in *Bible Echo* in 1892. From this pamphlet on the sufferings of Christ, and other parts of her writings, it is evident that White’s own views on atonement were not concordant with Waggoner’s views, and the differences were more than mere semantics.

In “The Sufferings of Christ,” White describes the sufferings Christ experienced during his life, his ministry, and the events surrounding his death on the cross in order to save humanity. In this context, uses the word atonement three times.¹² In contrast to Waggoner, however, she never refers to Christ’s heavenly priestly ministry in this pamphlet. The pamphlet discusses only the sufferings of Christ from his incarnation to Gethsemane and Calvary. Rather than limiting atonement to Christ’s heavenly ministry, as Waggoner does, White refers to atonement only in reference to the life, sufferings, and death of Jesus.

Her first reference to atonement occurs in the first paragraph and highlights a broader understanding of the subject than that held by Waggoner.

“In order to fully realize the value of salvation, it is necessary to understand what it cost. In consequence of limited ideas of the sufferings of Christ, many place a low estimate upon the great work of the atonement. The glorious plan of man’s salvation was brought about through the infinite love of God the Father. In this divine plan

¹⁰ Ibid., iv; [Uriah Smith], “The Atonement: Not Made On the Cross—In Process Now,” *Review and Herald*, January 30, 1894, 70.

¹¹ Now in *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1948), 2:200-215. All subsequent references to this pamphlet will be from this edition.

¹² Ibid., 200, 213, 215.

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is seen the most marvelous manifestation of the love of God to the fallen race.”¹³

Her other two references occur at the end of the pamphlet and also highlight the limited views of atonement which lead some people to a depreciation of Christ’s sufferings and death and of the salvation provided to sinners. One may wonder to what extent White wrote this pamphlet as an attempt to redress what she considered to be faulty or incomplete views of the death of Christ.

For centuries, theologians have attempted to explain the purpose and meaning of Christ’s death. Multiple theories, from the subjective Socinian exemplarist model to the objective Anselmic satisfaction theory, have been proposed, and a multitude of arguments have been discussed to support or reject various aspects of these theories. However, most evangelical scholars have argued along with Leon Morris that the reasons for Christ’s death are multifaceted, and no single theory embraces the totality of what God intended to do at the cross.¹⁴ What is perhaps most fascinating is to discover that within the sixteen pages of this pamphlet Ellen White embraced all the major theories of atonement and supported a broad understanding of the reasons for Calvary. Many of these views she expounded were clearly not within the scope of Waggoner’s understanding of what the sufferings and death of Christ meant.

The most basic aspect of Ellen White’s theology centers on the death of Christ as a demonstration of the love of God for lost humanity. “Who can comprehend the love here displayed,” she wrote. “All this in consequence of sin! Nothing could have induced Christ to leave His honor and majesty in heaven, and come to a sinful world, to be neglected, despised, and rejected by those He came to save, and finally to suffer upon the cross, but eternal, redeeming love, which will ever remain a mystery.”¹⁵ Moreover, she also affirmed that such a demonstration of the love of God morally influences humanity to do right. “Eternal interests are here involved. Upon this theme it is sin to be calm and unimpassioned. The scenes of Calvary call for the deepest emotion. Upon this subject you will be excusable if you manifest enthusiasm. . . . The contemplation of the matchless depths of a Saviour’s love should fill the mind, touch and melt the soul, refine and elevate the affections, and completely transform the whole character.”¹⁶ She also wrote that reflecting on the events of Calvary will awaken sacred emotions in the Christian’s heart and remove pride and self-esteem.¹⁷ The manifestation of such divine love at the cross was the means of reconciliation

¹³ Ibid., 200.

¹⁴ Leon Morris, *Glory in the Cross: A Study in Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 80.

¹⁵ *Testimonies for the Church*, 2:207.

¹⁶ Ibid., 213.

¹⁷ Ibid., 212.

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between the Father and humankind.¹⁸ Here we obviously see that White agreed with the subjective aspects of the theory of atonement espoused by Abelard.

But in the same pamphlet she supported aspects of many objective theories. In ways reminiscent of Hugo Grotius' governmental theory, she affirmed that Calvary was a vindication of God's character, law, and just government. "His death did not make the law of no effect; it did not slay the law, lessen its holy claims, nor detract from its sacred dignity. The death of Christ proclaimed the justice of His Father's law in punishing the transgressor, in that He consented to suffer the penalty of the law Himself in order to save fallen man from its curse. The death of God's beloved Son on the cross shows the immutability of the law of God. . . . The death of Christ justified the claims of the law."¹⁹

Since the time of the early church, the classical theory of atonement affirms that Calvary was the sign of Christ's ultimate victory over the powers of evil and Satan. This view was also held by Ellen White. "He was about to ransom His people with His own blood. . . . This was the means through which an end was to be finally made of sin and Satan, and his host to be vanquished."²⁰ At the cross, "Satan was then defeated. He knew that his kingdom was lost."²¹

For White, Christ's death was also a substitutionary death—Christ died our death and bore our sins. "Christ consented to die in the sinner's stead, that man, by a life of obedience, might escape the penalty of the law of God."²² At Calvary, "The glorious Redeemer of a lost world was suffering the penalty of man's transgression of the Father's law."²³ "The sins of the world were upon Him. He was suffering in man's stead as a transgressor of His Father's law."²⁴

One final aspect of atonement, and perhaps one of the first ones to be rejected in our modern world, is the understanding that Christ died in order to appease or propitiate the just wrath of God toward sin and sinners. This Anselmic (and Pauline) aspect of atonement was clearly affirmed by Ellen White. "Could mortals have viewed the amazement and the sorrow of the angelic host as they watched in silent grief the Father separating His beams of light, love, and glory from the beloved Son of His bosom, they would better understand how offensive sin is in His sight. The sword of justice was now to awake against His dear

¹⁸ Ibid., 211-212.

¹⁹ Ibid., 201.

²⁰ Ibid., 209.

²¹ Ibid., 211.

²² Ibid., 200-201.

²³ Ibid., 209.

²⁴ Ibid., 203. White argued as well that Christ's substitutionary death is the means by which sinners can be justified by faith. "Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. 'With His stripes we are healed'" (*Desire of Ages* [Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1898, 1940], 25).

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Son.”²⁵ “But bodily pain was but a small part of the agony of God’s dear Son. The sins of the world were upon Him, also the sense of His Father’s wrath as He suffered the penalty of the law transgressed. It was these that crushed His divine soul.”²⁶

This pamphlet was not a unique publication of Ellen White on the subject of atonement. In 1870, in the chapter titled “The Plan of Salvation” in volume 1 of her four-volume work *The Spirit of Prophecy*,²⁷ she makes a similar use of the word atonement in regard to the death of Christ as the appointed means to redeem humanity after the Fall of Adam and Eve. The same application of the word atonement is also included in an expansion of this chapter under the title “The Plan of Redemption” in her book *Patriarchs and Prophets*, published in 1890.²⁸ Clearly and consistently, Ellen White viewed the sufferings and death of Christ as the core events of the plan of salvation and used the word atonement to describe their effect in favor of lost sinners.

From statements in her other writings, we find other significant affirmations of the importance and centrality of Calvary in her theology, statements at variance with Waggoner’s theology. Unequivocally, she stated that atonement was accomplished at the cross. Commenting on Abel’s sacrifice, she wrote, “Through the shed blood he [Abel] looked to the future sacrifice, Christ dying on the cross of Calvary; and trusting in the atonement that was there to be made, he had the witness that he was righteous, and his offering accepted”²⁹ “Our great High Priest completed the sacrificial offering of Himself when He suffered without the gate. Then a perfect atonement was made for the sins of the people.”³⁰ Perhaps White’s clearest such statement is the following from 1901, “He [the Father] planted the cross between heaven and earth, and when the Father beheld the sacrifice of His son, He bowed before it in recognition of its perfection. ‘It is enough,’ he said, ‘the atonement is complete.’”³¹ Waggoner would never have made such a statement.

Also in contrast to Waggoner, White believed that Christ was both sacrifice and priest on the cross, and thus could minister a sacrifice of atonement on Calvary. “As the high priest laid aside his gorgeous pontifical robes, and officiated in the white linen dress of a common priest, so Christ emptied Himself, and took the form of a servant, and offered the sacrifice, Himself the priest, Himself the victim.”³²

²⁵ *Testimonies for the Church*, 2:207.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁷ *The Spirit of Prophecy* (Battle Creek: Review and Herald, 1870), 1:44-54.

²⁸ *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1890), 63-70.

²⁹ *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 72.

³⁰ Manuscript 128, 1897.

³¹ *Review and Herald*, September 24, 1901.

³² *Southern Watchman*, August 6, 1903.

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Ellen White certainly agreed with Waggoner's fears that a deficient view of atonement would lead to antinomianism and immorality. But in contrast to Waggoner, she emphasized the impact upon one's life of the sufferings of Christ from his incarnation to Golgotha as the antidote to these problems. A true understanding of the cross and the character of God will lead one to realize that God's law could not be abrogated or abolished at the cross, in fact, it was because the law of God could not be changed that Christ had to die. She believed that an accurate picture of Christ's sufferings and death on behalf of sinners will also influence one to turn to God in repentance and transform the life of a repentant sinner.

Having contrasted White's thoughts on atonement with those of Waggoner, we must avoid giving the impression that her views were totally opposite his. White's understanding of atonement was certainly different from Waggoner's but did not totally disagree with his biblical understanding of Christ's intercessory ministry in heaven. A few examples will illustrate her thought. In 1911 she wrote, "The intercession of Christ in man's behalf in the sanctuary above is as essential to the plan of salvation as was His death upon the cross. By His death He began that work which after His resurrection He ascended to complete in heaven."³³ Along the same thought she wrote in 1893, "Jesus is our great High Priest in heaven. And what is He doing?—He is making intercession and atonement for His people who believe in Him."³⁴ Statements such as these indicate that her understanding of atonement also includes Christ's ministry in heaven. In fact, already her pamphlet on "The Sufferings of Christ" pointed to Christ's entire life of suffering as part of her concept of atonement.

For the casual reader, her use of the word atonement may seem confusing, but a survey of White's writings reveals that she uses the word atonement in three different ways, from a specific, focused meaning to a broad meaning. As we have seen, in a fair number of instances the word is used to describe Calvary as a complete atonement.³⁵ In these cases, the meaning of atonement is specific and focused on a single event, the cross. In some other places, atonement takes on a broader meaning and includes the work of atonement of the high priestly ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. In these instances, she refers to Christ ministering the benefits of his complete atoning sacrifice on behalf of repentant sinners³⁶ or, in a few instances, refers to this work of Christ as atonement also.³⁷ Christ's heavenly ministry is thus seen as an integral part of his

³³ *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1911, 1950), 489. See also *Ibid.*, 421, 428, 623.

³⁴ *Review and Herald*, August 22, 1893.

³⁵ See, for example, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 72; *Signs of the Times*, August 25, 1887; December 30, 1889; June 28, 1899; *Review and Herald*, September 24, 1901.

³⁶ See, for example, Manuscript 29, 1906; *Early Writings*, 260.

³⁷ See, for example, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1926), 370; Manuscript 69, 1912. Some will argue, however, that her statements on

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work of redemption. Her third use of the word atonement is broader still. As we have seen in the pamphlet on “The Sufferings of Christ,” White uses the word atonement in reference to Christ’s entire life of suffering.³⁸ In this and other instances, her understanding of Christ’s work of atonement becomes almost synonymous with Christ’s entire work of redemption and thus includes not only the cross as the central event of atonement, but also all that Christ is doing to save humankind from the moment the plan of redemption was devised before the foundation of the world to the final eradication of sin at the end of time.³⁹ Here, atonement is a process in time whose parts cannot be divorced.

To help us grasp this early Adventist understanding of atonement, one should keep in mind that early Adventism did not conceive its theological system within the Aristotelian presuppositions of the Augustinian and Calvinist systems in which an immovable and impassible God exists only in timelessness. Crucial events of the plan of redemption are consequently the results of decrees God has proclaimed from all eternity. Nothing new as such can be done by God, and the entire plan of redemption is predetermined in God’s eternal foreknowledge. Adventism adopted a different system of thought in which God actually interacts with humanity within time and space during various events of salvation history. In this system, God’s foreknowledge of future events is only descriptive of human responses and not prescriptive. This drastic difference in philosophical and theological presuppositions allowed Waggoner and White to see all the events of the plan of redemption, including atonement, as a linear process in which God is genuinely engaged rather than only a series of preordained punctiliar events shaped in the mind of God in eternity past.

Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary which refer to Christ applying the benefits of his atoning sacrifice to believers should be viewed as her dominant understanding of this phase of Christ’s ministry and that one should not make a case of her other statements where she refers to atonement *per se* being done in heaven. It is argued that her 1901 statements on the two phases of the priesthood of Christ gives support to this understanding. “He [Christ] fulfilled one phase of His priesthood by dying on the cross for the fallen race. He is now fulfilling another phase by pleading before the Father the case of the repenting, believing sinner, presenting to God the offerings of His people” (Manuscript 42, 1901). While these two phases are complementary, the complete atonement on the cross is the dominant event of Christ’s work.

³⁸ *Testimonies for the Church*, 2:200, 213, 215. “We should take *broader and deeper* views of the life, sufferings, and death of God’s dear Son. When the atonement is viewed correctly, the salvation of souls will be felt to be of infinite value” (Ibid., 215, italics supplied).

³⁹ “Human science is too limited to comprehend the atonement. The plan of redemption is so far-reaching that philosophy cannot explain it. It will ever remain a mystery that the most profound reasoning cannot fathom. The science of salvation cannot be explained; but it can be known by experience. Only he who sees his own sinfulness can discern the preciousness of the Saviour” (*Desire of Ages*, 494-495). Other examples of a synonymous use of atonement and plan of salvation include *Desire of Ages*, 565-566; *Great Controversy*, 503; *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1956, 1980), 5:1101; Manuscript 21, 1895.

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Conclusion

This study attempts to illustrate the theological differences on the doctrine of atonement between two Adventist pioneers, Joseph H. Waggoner and Ellen White, who both wrote on the subject at about the same time in the 1860s. While Waggoner limited atonement to the work of Christ's priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, White centered her concept of atonement on the sufferings and death of Christ. For White, Calvary is the crucial and central event for the atonement of humankind. Christ's death on the cross demonstrates the love of the Father for a lost humanity, is the means of reconciliation, influences men and women to abide by a higher moral standard, vindicates the character, law, and just government of God, is a substitute for our sufferings and eternal death as a consequence of sin, and appeases the just wrath of God. While White accepted the importance of Christ's atoning ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, she also clearly referred to the cross event as a complete atonement. In contrast, Waggoner readily agreed with many of these subjective and objective aspects of the meaning of the sacrifice of Christ, but refused to tie them to atonement *per se* and considered the cross only as the preparatory means for Christ's atoning work in the heavenly sanctuary after his ascension.

Ellen White's thoughts on atonement conveyed a breadth of meaning that was far more comprehensive than that of some of her contemporary Adventist theologians and friends. Although she agreed with some of their concepts on atonement, she had her own marked theological differences. This comparison also illustrates the fact that doctrinal diversity existed in early Adventism, even in such crucial doctrines as atonement.

In 1901, Ellen White penned the following statement on the theological significance of the death of Christ, a statement that reflects the christological depth of her thought: "The sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary. I present before you the great, grand monument of mercy and regeneration, salvation and redemption,—the Son of God uplifted on the cross."⁴⁰

Denis Fortin is Associate Professor of Theology and Associate Dean at the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University. He teaches historical theology and Ellen G. White studies. He has pastored in Quebec, Canada, where he also earned his Ph.D. in early Adventist history and theology at the Université Laval. fortind@andrews.edu

⁴⁰ *Gospel Workers* (Washington: Review and Herald, 1915), 315.